

## Strategies to Improve Fathers' Involvement in Education

*Excerpted from: A Call to Commitment: Fathers' Involvement in Children's Learning*

There are strategies to reduce obstacles to fathers' involvement in education. To help dads warm up and get involved with their children means to convince them of the significance of small, very simple interactions with their children--interactions that may seem very insignificant to the dads, but mean a great deal to their children.

It is important to remember up front that both sensitivity and self-confidence are greater than any specific skills in paternal behavior and influence. Sensitivity is critical to both involvement and closeness. The closeness of the father-child relationship is the crucial determinant of the dad's impact on a child's development and adjustment. Developing sensitivity enables a dad to evaluate his child's signals or needs, and respond to them appropriately (Abramovitch in Lamb, 1997).

### **What Fathers Can Do at Home, at School and in the Community**

Fathers can initiate or participate in activities that help their children succeed academically. Helping children learn can increase success in school. The nature and frequency with which parents interact in positive ways with their children reflect the parents' investment in their children's education (NCES, 2000). Here are some steps that fathers can take at home, at school and in the community that make a positive difference for their children's education.

#### ***At home, fathers can:***

**Read with their children.** The ability to read well is known to be one of the most critical skills a child needs to be successful. Parents and caregivers often ask how they can get their children interested in reading, interested enough to turn off the TV and to read on their own? Years of research show that the best way is for

the parent to serve as a model reader by reading to the child and by reading themselves. If the father can't read the text, he can stimulate his child's imagination by telling stories using a picture book. In addition, he can ask other significant adults to read to younger children and ask older children to read to him. He can take frequent trips to the library with the child to check out books and get to know the children's librarian and children's library programs.

**Establish a daily routine.** Fathers can set a time for homework, chores and other activities; use TV wisely by limiting viewing to no more than two hours a school day; and work with their child on homework and special projects, guiding them through the steps involved and encouraging them along the way. Parents don't need to have in-depth knowledge of a subject, but can be supportive of their child in working through tough spots in her or his school work.

**Make the most of bedtime.** Bedtime is a terrific opportunity for fathers to connect with their children. For one thing, the audience is definitely captive! There are also fewer distractions. But perhaps most importantly, there is no judge standing by with a scorecard rating the dad on his performance.

At bedtime, a father can enrich a child's life merely by recounting what he did during the day. Discussing the day's events shows interest in the child and builds his or her knowledge. A father may also tell or read a story. Every moment he spends and every word he says builds a relationship with his child.

#### ***At school and other childcare and child development programs, fathers can:***

**Participate in efforts to keep their children's schools or childcare centers safe.**

**Plan for the future** by talking with their children and school counselors about future high school courses and postsecondary career options.

**Attend parent-teacher conferences and school or class events.**

**Volunteer at school.** Fathers are welcome at schools as tutors, as leaders of afternoon or evening clubs, as chaperons for field trips, social activities or athletic events, or as classroom speakers who share information about their work and the world of work and how education contributed to their expertise on the job.

**Visit their child's school or center.** Father-child breakfasts or lunches are good opportunities to informally share a meal with children and learn about their daily school experiences, successes and concerns.

**Meet their child's teachers** and learn about school curriculum, and how to become involved in activities.

**Pitch in to help meet school and program needs,** such as installing new playground equipment, cooking at a school picnic or painting and repairing school property.

**Join the Parent Teacher Association or other parent groups** at their child's school or childcare center. At meetings, they can make their voices heard regarding their concerns and ideas for school improvement.

***In the community, fathers can:***

**Play or coach a game or sport** they like with their children on a regular basis.

**Become involved in community activities** by joining a community group, place of worship, union or professional group to participate with their children in an ongoing service activity.

**Take time for family outings** to places such as libraries, zoos, museums, concerts and sports events or other recreational events.

**Use their community learning center** to participate in after-school and evening educational and recreational activities such as English as a Second Language, parenting, literacy, arts and music programs and crafts or computer classes. These courses are often designed for parents and their children to learn together.

### **What Schools, Educators, Programs and Providers Can Do**

Most schools, preschools and Head Start programs want to involve parents in their children's learning. They offer information about learning at home and child-rearing issues. They hold back-to-school nights, parent-teacher conferences and athletic events to promote parental involvement. Schools and centers keep families informed of their children's progress and performance through ongoing contact including newsletters, conferences, telephone calls and e-mail.

In order to engage fathers more fully as partners in children's learning, schools, programs and providers need to challenge the assumption that parent involvement means only *mothers'* involvement by proactively encouraging fathers to be part of the family learning team. A "family friendly environment" must also mean a "father friendly environment" and a "mother friendly environment."

How can schools take the lead to expand fathers' involvement in their children's education?

***Use the National PTA Standards as a guide.*** The National PTA Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs clearly outline six types of parent involvement in education. Use these PTA standards to evaluate what your school is doing and to identify areas you would like to

strengthen for working with families, especially fathers. These are:

**Communicating**—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

**Parenting**—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

**Student Learning**—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

**Volunteering**—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

**School Decision-Making and Advocacy**—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

**Collaborating with Community**—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning. (National PTA, 1997)

**Communicate with fathers.** Whether fathers are in two-parent families or single-parent families, or are nonresident fathers, they should be encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education and in supporting the school, preschool or Head Start program through volunteer work.

**Provide nonresident fathers** with student progress reports and other important information as well as the mother.

**School notices:** Mothers and fathers should know they are welcome at school and should receive communications from school. If mother and father live in the same home, address school notices to both of them—not just to the mother. If one parent does not live in the same home as the child, that parent should also receive notices from the school unless there is a legal reason to the contrary. Discretion should also be used in cases where separation exists for the protection of family members.

**Expect fathers' involvement.** If educators and childcare providers do not see fathers involved, it is natural for them to assume that fathers do not want to be involved. However, it is often the case that fathers and mothers do not think the schools and centers want dad to be involved. The best way to break out of this "chicken-and-egg" dilemma is to communicate clearly to all parents that fathers and mothers as well are *expected* to be involved. There are many simple ways to do this.

**Enrollment forms:** When enrolling a child in your school or early childhood development program, ask explicitly for the father's name, address and phone numbers.

**Calls home:** When calling a child's home, do not assume that you have to speak to the mother. Your completed enrollment form will give you an indication of whether dad resides in the same household.

**School or center meetings:** When inviting parents to a meeting, make clear that you would like and expect both parents to attend, if possible. It may be necessary to reschedule some meeting times to ensure that mother *and* father are able to attend.

**Alternatives to volunteering:** Let fathers know that parent involvement does not only mean volunteering at school, preschool or Head Start program. Helping their child learn at home or outside of school are important forms of involvement.

**Provide information and training to parents and school or center staff.** For many dads, fathering education would positively affect their ability to impact their child's education. Schools, centers and programs can provide classes or sessions on building a warm, caring relationship with children that includes strategies like: listening to a child's problems, giving advice, explaining rules, monitoring school performance, helping with homework, engaging in projects and giving praise and using discipline, without the use of physical force, to

deal with misbehavior. Note that many nonresident dads put the emphasis on having "fun" while they are with their children because they do not want to risk starting a conflict.

Teaching mothers and fathers how to tutor their children in basic subjects and/or help their children, for example with motor skills development has also been designated as an area of need. This support to children's learning can be given through home visits or at parent workshops in schools or other childcare and community centers.

For school staff, information and training could include technical assistance on topics such as making home visits and positive phone calls, appreciating diversity and family strengths, developing skills for parent-teacher conferences that address both mothers' and fathers' questions and concerns and helping families become stronger learning environments.

***Establish family resource centers in schools.*** In centers, parents can read or borrow books on parenting, meet informally with teachers, attend small workshops, and learn of local jobs, services and programs. Provide books, workshops and meetings specifically for fathers.

***Adjust school and childcare activity schedules to meet family needs.*** Host father-child breakfasts before the workday begins, or dinners after work, so that fathers can meet teachers, childcare providers and other school or center staff.

***Create a father friendly environment.*** Many men feel uncomfortable visiting their children's school for reasons that school personnel may not even realize. If a father did not do well in school himself, he may feel insecure any time he enters a school setting. There are many easy ways to make fathers feel welcome. Include fathers in parent/teacher conferences, after-school and extracurricular activities, in mentoring and tutoring activities and in making classroom presentations on careers and the educational preparation needed for these

careers. Holding specially designed support groups for dads encourages them to focus on common issues of importance to them.

**Warm greetings.** Nothing breaks the ice like a warm welcome. Greet fathers by name when they attend school events, and tell them how glad you are to see them.

**Recognize children's progress.** All parents love to hear good news about their children. Whether fathers are visiting school or a center for regularly scheduled meetings, or because their child is having some particular problem, find something positive to say about their child's progress.

**Reinforce fathers' contributions.** All parents want to know — and rarely hear — that they are contributing to their children's education. If you recognize the contribution a father is making to his child's learning, he will be more likely to want to return.

**Father-to-father strategies.** Develop strategies and programs that encourage older fathers to mentor young fathers and young fathers to mentor first-time fathers.

**Parent-teacher meetings.** When fathers attend parent-teacher meetings, make sure to include them in the discussion. Too often dads feel as if they were the invisible figure at what was, in effect, a "mother-teacher" meeting. Teacher body language is a good sign of whether or not dad is being included. Is your chair swiveled towards mom? Is your eye contact mostly with mom? Are you inviting questions from the father as well as the mother?

**Images on display.** Posters, photos and drawings on the walls of classrooms and hallways can send a powerful message to parents about who is welcome in the school. Check the images you have on display to verify whether fathers are welcome in your school.

**Find out what fathers want.** One of the most effective but least used ways to involve fathers

is to find out what interests them about their child's school or childcare program and what they would like to contribute to the school.

***Deal with resistance to change.*** Although all staff members are likely to agree with the *idea* of getting fathers more involved in children's learning, their *feelings* are often otherwise. The same goes for mothers. For example, women who have been abused or abandoned by men may have reservations about reaching out to fathers. Dealing with emotional resistance to the involvement of fathers in children's learning is not easy, but it is important.

**Group discussions** can be an effective way to identify feelings and to help people realize they are not the only ones with those feelings. A staff group or a group of mothers can gather to discuss their relationships with their own fathers while they were growing up, what it would have meant to have their own fathers more involved and what it would take to involve more fathers in children's learning. To channel what will be an emotional discussion in the most constructive way, consider having a trained professional from your staff — a psychologist or social worker — serve as the discussion leader.

**Men and women together.** Under the direction of a skilled group leader, a dialogue between mothers and fathers can be a very effective way to learn what's keeping men from being more involved — and what it would take for them to become more involved.

***Staff early school positions with males.*** Staffing childcare facilities (infant to school-age care) with male teachers and other caregivers helps make dads more comfortable and feel that their stake in their children's success is as great as the mothers'. Attendance at parent conferences increases when a greater number of fathers and other males related to the child are involved (Braver and Griffin, 1996).

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## **What Other Community Partners Can Do**

### ***Employers can:***

**Offer more flexible work schedules** so fathers can take time off to attend and become involved in school and related educational activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, the Parent Teacher Association, field trips, athletic events and other social activities.

**Initiate volunteer programs** that encourage employees to become mentors, coaches and tutors or to help improve schools' technology infrastructure, buildings and grounds.

**Offer fatherhood and parenting education** sessions for interested dads.

**Provide information services** to parents related to postsecondary education and training for their children.

### ***Communities can:***

**Encourage civic, service, religious and charitable groups to promote responsible fatherhood** within their membership and across the country.

**Open their facilities to encourage after-school and evening educational and recreational activities and courses** for children and their parents.

**Provide opportunities for community wide social and recreational events** for families.

**Organize school, family, community college and university and public and community agency support** for families within their community.